

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE

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Annotation: The elemental definition of bias is “an error in decision-making.” Unconscious biases are prejudices humans have but are unaware of. They are mental associations based on social norms and stereotypes. There is a reason it is called unconscious bias. It is because hard-wired biases operate at a level that is beneath conscious awareness. Even if it is believed a person is being fair and objective, stereotypes may still be influencing opinions - without any awareness of it. Subsequently, such oblivious inclinations may create unfair disadvantages within organizations. Thus, the objective of this paper is to review prior studies to analyze the nature of unconscious bias in the workforce and to propose a possible intervention to manage it.

Key words: unconscious bias, stereotypes, diversity, underrepresentation, discrimination.

Everyone has biases or prejudices, both negative and positive. These biases affect how a person sees the world. Many of these are conscious or overt, but there are also many unconscious or hidden biases that influence thoughts, decisions, and actions without humans themselves being aware of them. Unconscious bias causes individuals to make decisions that favor or exclude others. While bias is a normal part of human brain function, it can reinforce stereotypes. Stereotype is an oversimplified belief about a group of people, usually based on limited or incorrect information. Every individual has unconscious biases. A bias refers to thoughts and opinions that are formed and reinforced throughout a person's life through interaction with family and others, as well as under the influence of media, cultural phenomena and historical concepts (Noon, 2018). Even the everyday language and images of the particular communities in which a person lives are carriers of bias. Unconscious bias can cause decisions that result in a homogenous workplace, where everyone is nearly the same type of person who thinks the same way. The phenomenon of unconscious bias to the inadvertent endorsement of certain preferences to a given entity and can be attributed, at least partially, to innate human tendencies. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge and comprehend our unconscious biases in order to mitigate their effects and facilitate equitable outcomes in the recruitment process.

Types of unconscious biases

Similarity bias, also known as affinity bias. This is the predisposition of people to communicate with people who have similar interests, experiences and backgrounds (Oberai and Anand, 2018). When companies hire for “cultural fit” reasons, they are most likely to succumb to this type of bias. They tend to like those candidates who have similar interests, experience and backgrounds as them.

Ageism is the tendency to judge another person by age. Older people are more likely to be victims of ageism than younger people, especially in the US. DeAngelis (2022) reported that approximately 62% of workers feel that age discrimination begins when they turn 50. At this time, it becomes more difficult to change jobs, find a job or move up the career ladder, as businesses increasingly favor young people, although experience and knowledge are vital skills for any successful organization.

The anchoring effect occurs when a person relies on a small amount of information when trying to make a decision. The anchoring effect can occur in the workplace too. It is a common occurrence in the hiring process when comparing potential candidates. A recruiter may notice one trait in a candidate and then be unable to "miss" that trait when considering other candidates. For instance, the first candidate considered by a recruiter may be willing to accept a much lower salary than the rest. This can lead to an anchoring effect when subsequent candidates ask for more (Ni et al, 2019).

The halo effect is the tendency of people to elevate another person after discovering something outstanding in him. Oberai and Anand (2018) suggested that halo effect can occur at any point in the hiring process. It can be noticed in a candidate who worked for a well-known firm or graduated from a prestigious educational institution.

Conformity bias, often known as peer pressure. Conformity bias is the tendency for people to behave in the same way as those around them, regardless of their particular ideas or idiosyncrasies. This kind of influence can cause a person to change their assessment of a candidate to reflect the majority view when your recruiting team meets to evaluate candidates and conduct an interview. The difficulty is that the majority can be wrong, which leads to turning down a great candidate, because a person turning a blind eye to his opinion in favor of the opinion of colleagues.

Gender bias is a preference for one gender over another. At work, men are often given preference over women. However, studies have shown that both men and women prefer male candidates. When both candidates have the same qualifications, a man is 1.5 times more likely to be hired than a woman (US Bureau of Labor Statistics).

The horn effect is the tendency of people to form an unfavorable opinion of another person after discovering some unpleasant or harmful trait in them. The horn effect, which is the opposite of the halo effect, can cause recruiting teams to select candidates for qualities that are opposite to the team's preferences. It could be something minor, like a job applicant working for a despised firm, or displaying a particular quirk or demeanor during an interview. Even though some aspect may or may not be significant, such characteristics may ultimately influence the opinion of a person (Mathisen, Einarsen, & Mykletun, 2011).

How to diminish unconscious bias?

The presence of unconscious biases can be addressed through several strategies and techniques, which can help individuals and organizations handle unconscious bias effectively. Individuals are advised to explore how their biases may affect their attitudes and behavior, and institutions should strive to bias-proof their policies and programs. The very first step would be to learn about unconscious bias and become committed to managing implicit biases. It is also important to understand that those biases are normal. Individuals should review research about how bias can affect behaviors and become more alert to times when they might be biased. Individuals also can disrupt stereotypes about members of underrepresented groups by obtaining evidence-based knowledge about those groups rather than relying implicitly on sources such as mainstream media, which tend to present twisted, negative portrayals.

Conclusion

The statement that "bias is bad" can be misleading. Bias in itself is neither good nor bad. There are certainly benefits to having biases—they increase the efficiency of decision-making. However, unconscious biases can influence your behavior or judgment without your knowledge. An unconscious bias can significantly influence the workplace, determining who is hired and promoted.

It is possible to interrupt the bias. Individuals can engage in self-monitoring to discern when they are thinking under the influence of dominant belief systems that place humans into hierarchies

that socialize us to value some groups less than others. Leaders can implement numerous steps to manage effects of bias at the institutional level. They can evaluate program statistics by race, ethnicity, and gender to look for patterns in recruitment, retention, mentoring programs, research opportunities, and appraisal processes that might be affected by unconscious bias. As they analyze data, they should foresee differences within gender and race categories to look for patterns that may be instructive.

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